Ruth First

From

Black Gold: The Mozambican Miner, Proletarian and Peasant

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Workers or Peasants?

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Workers or Peasants?

This study has shown how the labour of the peasant societies of southern Mozambique was used over prolonged periods to fuel the accumulation of South African mining capital. In these three provinces, the mine recruitment system was all-pervasive. Field research teams found hardly a man of working age who had never worked a mine contract. The only men they did find were sick or disabled; or self-employed craftsmen, such as carpenters. Furthermore, men did not work occasional contracts, say, at the beginning of their working lives when they needed money to marry and to set up an independent household. On the contrary, men worked successive contracts; they worked long contracts; and they spent a large proportion of their working lives in the mines. Part II, *The Mine Labour Force*, sets out the evidence.

We have tried to show how these peasant societies, far from constituting some 'traditional' sector distinct from the so-called 'modern' sector, as dualist theory would have it, were deeply penetrated: accumulation by mining capital in the highly industrialized South African economy was based on labour extracted from these and other peasant societies in the region. In the course of this penetration, the cycles of production, distribution and consumption of the peasant economies were largely destroyed. Peasant families became dependent on wages from mine labour for their very reproduction; that is, for the purchase of the basic necessities of everyday family life. Peasant households became principally dependent on wage labour, not on the proceeds of agricultural production, for their purchase of essential instruments of production like ploughs, working oxen, grain mills, even hoes for agriculture. Likewise artisan skills and crafts were made dependent on the proceeds of mine work, for this petty commodity production became reliant on the monies earned from outside the peasant economy. Mine wages were used to purchase sewing machines, and carpentry and building tools; and the proceeds from mine work purchased the finished products from this sector. Young families in these labour-exporting areas could not establish their own households – build their homes and establish agricultural production – without access to wage work. The case studies of Maimela and Homoine explain this in detail.

Thus, as mining capital accumulation took place on the basis of labour extracted from these peasant communities, the reproduction of the peasant economies in turn became dependent on the wage income channelled back by the migrant miners. Mine wages

were needed to ensure the reproduction of the peasant economy; and that peasant economy in turn reproduced successive generations of miners.

The role of mine labour in the reproduction of peasant households of southern Mozambique can be qualified for particular years. Thus calculations of the value of agricultural produce sold by peasant households, and of the sum of mine wages, show that in 1967 the total of mine wages paid out to miners in the three southern provinces was over eight times greater than the value of marketed agricultural production in the same year.

	Value of agricultural produce sold by peasant households (000 escudos)	*Total mine wages*
3 Southern provinces together	85,000	717,000
Inhambane province	24,000	209,000

The process of accumulation of capital from mining depended on the extraction of labour-power of migrant workers from rural areas. His transformed the rural economy, and created the worker-peasant. These worker-peasants are not totally divorced from the means of production in the rural areas, their land and instruments; nor are they independent producers who can reproduce their households and their agricultural plots without spells of wage work. Consequently, class formation cannot be analysed either within or outside the capitalist form of relations. Not only do worker-peasants exchange their labour-power for wages, but peasant production is subordinated to and shaped by the dominant capitalist mode of production.

As a miner the migrant worker has been part of a concentrated labour force, subject to industrial work discipline, acquiring experience of labour unity and organisation. His dismissal back to the rural economy at the end of his contract imposes limitations on forms of labour organisation and action at the point of industrial production. Thus there is a continuous process of both concentration and dispersion of the labour force. Within the rural economy, this system of labour use likewise produces distinctive social forms. We have already shown the coincidence between expanded peasant production and higher wage incomes from mine labour. The differentiation into a middle and poor peasantry arises from these groups' differential reliance on wage labour, and on different wage and skill levels within the mining industry. The stratum of middle peasants is able, after a period of wage work on the mines, to sustain a certain level of agricultural production. By contrast, the poor peasants cannot withdraw from the contract cycle; their agricultural base is too poor to sustain their families without contract renewals, and they regard themselves as unemployed when not on contract. In these Southern Mozambican provinces the presence of a considerable stratum of middle peasants, often producing significant market surpluses, disposes of any notion that that the invariable action in these labour peasant societies is to reduce the social formation to a mere

reserve army of labour. At the same time these peasants cannot be described as independent petty commodity producers, since acquisition of the means of production and, at times, even of sources of reproduction, derives from mine wage labour.

These specific forms of incomplete and impermanent proletarianisation, and of peasant differentiation between a middle and a poor peasantry, are not necessarily merely temporary. In the labour-exporting regions of Southern Africa, the action of mining capital in both dissolving and sustaining forms of peasant production can be expected to continue to the extent on the one hand that it serves the requirements of capital, and, on the other, that the peasant economy can sustain the continuous labour drain without the total disintegration of agricultural production.

In Mozambique's southern provinces continuous labour export throughout the twentieth century resulted in serious distortions in patterns of agricultural production. But this was not the only form of surplus extraction imposed on the peasantry by the Portuguese colonial system, for, especially after the 1940s and 1950s, as colonial economic policy impelled the production of cheap raw materials, the same producers were subjected to forced cropping of rice and cotton. Colonial policy thus demanded both forced labour and forced cropping, and never succeeded in resolving the tension between those two contradictory compulsions on the same peasantry. In almost all the areas studied, the effect of this double and combined policy of surplus extraction led to a drop in land productivity, and in the living standards of the peasants. Forced cultivation of cash crops conflicted with food-growing needs, and labour export conflicted with the disposition of labour during the agricultural season. Land which had formerly been used for groundnuts had to be given over to the production of cashew nuts for export: there was a consequent fall in the output and production of groundnuts from which the area had never recovered. The land was overtaxed by the pressures of growing food, forced cash crops, and the production of marketable crops which offered a source of cash incomes and a certain alternative to labour migration.

Any reconstruction of agriculture in independent Mozambique requires careful rethinking, and an alteration of colonial crop patterns to ensure the security and health of peasant families as well as provide them with a source of cash earnings. By the end of the colonial period, it had become abundantly clear that decades of labour export had created a male labour force which could not readily be reabsorbed into the peasant economy. This 'labour surplus' was not generated by increases in agricultural production, which had been undermined over a long period. The reabsorption of labour previously exported to the South African mines and the reconstruction of agriculture became two of the most important tasks of Mozambican society after independence.

This study of the worker-peasants of the south of Mozambique, who have been locked into both mine work and peasant household production, captures the end of an era whose demise is being ushered in by a two-fold series of events. The first has been the accession to power of Frelimo, and its commitment to restructuring the Mozambican economy and the eventual ending of migrant labour. Second, there have been two forms of labour displacement by the mining industry. These have been influenced partly by Frelimo's victory and its implications for the balance of political power in Southern Africa, but they have principally derived from changes in the pattern of capital accumulation and employment in the South African mining industry.

There have been two forms of labour displacement in mining. The first has been the substitution of capital for labour in an extended programme of mechanisation, especially in recently-developed mines. The scope for substituting machinery for labour in the South African gold mines is limited, given the cost conditions and technical requirements of deep-level South African gold mining; and technical changes will not end the industry's dependence on large numbers of African workers, but will bring about changes in the size and structure of the African labour force. According to projections for employment levels in mining for the rest of this century, employment in gold mining in South Africa will fall by about 65 per cent, from 424,992 to some 148,000 in the year 2000. The expansion o coal and base metal mining, which is increasingly exploited by open-cast and highly capital-intensive techniques, will keep total employment in mining up to its 1977 total.

The second form of labour displacement is the substitution of South African for other mine labour. The alarming projections for African unemployment in South Africa, as both industry and agriculature reduce their labour requirements, suggest that the present trend towards the internalisation of mine labour supply will be at the continuing expense of labour recruited from outside. After 1974, as has already been pointed out, the ratio between 'foreign' and South African labour was dramatically reversed. By 1976 the proportion of 'foreign' workers on the mines had dropped to 57 per cent; by 1977 it was 48 per cent; by 1979 it had fallen lower still, to 46 per cent. As he trend continues, the African labour force of the mines will be drawn increasingly from the South African 'Bantustans', especially the Transkei and the Ciskei. This does not mean that the Chamber of Mines will cease all importation of labour from the outside supply areas, but that it will perfect its strategy spreading its supply of controlled labour inputs.

These attempts to achieve a more permanent work force *within* a migrant labour system have been accompanied by changes in the industry's African wage policy. Sharp rises in the gold price following the breakdown of the Bretton-Woods fixed gold price system in 1971, together with the eruption of African mine strikes in 1972, 1973 and 1974, which have continued sporadically since then, made it necessary and possible to increase the general levels for black miners – which had been virtually unaltered since 1897. The

increase in mine wages to levels approaching those paid in industry made it possible for the mines to compete with industry for supplies of South African labour.

It was the Anglos-American Corporation which broke from the wage-fixing machinery of the Chamber of Mines and led the trend towards higher wages; and it has maintained that lead. Thus in May 1980 Anglo-American approached the heads of other mining houses to suggest that surface workers get a 58 per cent rise, and underground wages be raised as much as 120 per cent. In the event, by July 1980 the wages of African novice underground workers were increased by 15 per cent fromR86.89 to R100 a month and the minimum starting wage for novice surface workers was increased by 28 per cent from R58.50 to R75 a month. For Anglo-American, which operates the newest, most capital intensive and most profitable mines, the increases were 'a disappointment and a compromise'. The increases, though a startling contrast with the wages paid African miners in the period before the higher wage policy of the 1970s, still did not reduce the differential in real terms between the lowest paid white and black miners. They also made little dent in mining profits. Thus the new wage increases would increase total mining costs by only 5.5 per cent. The mines repeated at the time of the announcement of the new wage scales that there was no shortage of African mine labour. So the present trend seems set to continue: calculated cutbacks of labour from external supply sources, and the balancing and weighing of competing areas of labour supply. In recent labour supply negotiations with supply states, the Chamber of Mines made its strategy explicit. Thus, while particular states are allocated quotas of the minimum number of labourers to be recruited in a given period, the undertaking is made conditional, that is 'subject to prevailing economic conditions'. In the formal agreement concluded in 1973 with the Lesotho Government, the clause left no room for doubt: 'The engagement of Lesotho citizens for employment in South Africa shall be subject to the availability of South African labour, and may be regulated by the South African authorities accordingly'. (Article V (b).)

The changed labour policies of the mining industry relates, of course, not only to changed supply policies, but also to the reconstitution of the African labour force itself. Here the policy is directed at what the Chamber has called 'the principle of permanence': that is, the maintenance, within a migrant labour force, of a relatively stable body of workers that will be encouraged to re-contract within its re-employment guarantee system. We have already explained the working of the Re-employment Guarantee and Early Return Bonus Certificate operated by mines affiliated to the Chamber, which gives miners repatriated after the statutory contract period an incentive to return to the same mine within a stipulated period of time. This system is being refined and extended. Miners are eligible for the certificate after one year's service; the certificate is valid for six months; and the mine worker may return to his previous mine of employment at any time within that six-month period. In other words, he is no longer required to observe an interval of

eight months between contracts. On the worker's return to the mine, he receives the rate of pay applicable to the job category he was placed before, and where possible in the same work. Further refinements still are contemplated, namely, that the worker should return on a particular date after an agreed leave period, as part of a call-in card system which until recently applied to labour from within South Africa only, but which is now being extended.

TEBA has now computerised its records for recruiting labour. This makes it easier to administer the 'permanent' employment of migrant workers. It also makes it easier to control the workforce and to discriminate selectively against workers who may incur their employers' or compound manager's displeasure, even by blacklisting them from mine labour.

For independent Mozambique, these changes in South African labour policy had a profound impact at a number of levels. After 1975 the recruitment figures dropped heavily to as little as a quarter of previous levels. The Chamber of Mines fixed a quota of 30,000 Mozambican recruits a year; he total of workers recruited in 1979 was slightly higher, just under 40,000. The recruitment of new miners virtually ceased. This was a drastic cutback, and the abrupt reduction in recruitment was combined with the crisis in agricultural production that accompanied the collapse of the former colonial state's marketing system. The result was a marked drop in the standard of living of the southern peasantry. Additionally, at the national level, the payment of premiums under the special gold clause was abolished in March 1978, as a result of the agreement by the International Monetary Fund that South Africa revalue her gold holdings and the selling price of her gold. Within three years, from 1976 to 1978, a system of labour sale which had sustained Portuguese colonialism in Mozambique for almost a century was in a state of crisis. It was symptomatic of the general crisis of the colonial economy, not least within the rural economies, with which the new Mozambican government was confronted as it took power.

Mozambique has always been heavily dependent on its agriculture: this sector accounted for perhaps 40 per cent of gross national product by 1973, and about 75 per cent of the country's commodity exports. When Frelimo came to power, the agricultural sector was disrupted by a massive exodus of Portuguese settlers. Settler agriculture had expanded rapidly after World War II and had received strong backing from the state, especially in settlement schemes such as the Limpopo *colonato*. It was the settler agriculture which used irrigation, tractors, fertilisers and improves seed, and it was this sector which practically monopolised food exports and the supply of higher quality food stuffs to the urban market. By 1970 agriculture employed some 70,000 permanent labourers and 230,000 seasonal workers, perhaps about 12 per cent of the total active population. With

the accession to power of the independence government, these settler farms were virtually wholly abandoned. There was large-scale destruction of assets; livestock was slaughtered or neglected; irrigation canals were abandoned to be clogged by silt. The breakdown of the settler agriculture sector had drastic consequences both for production and for the marketing system, since the trading network which had purchased not only the settler but also peasant crops, and which had sold basic consumer goods to the surplus-producing peasantry, had been dominated by settler interests, and was now likewise abandoned.

The colonial system thus left Mozambique with a double agricultural crisis. On the one hand the collapse of colonial agriculture meant a sever shortage of food for the towns; and on the other hand and simultaneously the peasant economy was stricken by the running down of wage labour openings and thus of sources of cash investment in agriculture, and also by the breakdown of the marketing system and thus of commercial openings for peasant produce.

The scale of the problem of the absorption of mine labour phased out by the South African mining industry can only fully be grasped by looking at the domestic employment structure inherited from the colonial period.

Colonial statistics for Mozambique are notoriously unreliable, and there are wide disparities between estimates of wage employment in various sectors; however they serve to emphasise the gravity of the post-independence unemployment problem. For manufacturing industry the wage labour force was estimated to be between 85,000 (Industrial Statistics for 1973) and 156,000 (1970 Census). The transport sector employed 60,000 wage workers; construction about 23,000; mining 6,800. Wage employment in the economy’s productive sectors outside agriculture therefore amounted to little more than about 200,000, which means that by the 1970s there were almost as many, if not more, wage-earners employed outside Mozambique – in South Africa and Rhodesia – as in the domestic economy. After 1974 domestic employment fell. There were heavy cutbacks in the services sector, especially transport and tourism, and by 1976 industrial output alone dropped by 40 per cent. Though government policy was to prevent the dismissal of workers and to maintain employment levels, there was no question of expansion until the economic crisis had been weathered.

This crisis of the immediate post-colonial period actually occurred in two distinct phases. After 1974 and until the end of 1977, there were drastic falls in production and in export earnings, but not a foreign exchange and balance of payments crisis. This was because the economy benefited from the exceptionally high mine labour recruitment of 1975, and especially from the special arrangement between Portugal and South Africa (from which independent Mozambique benefited briefly), according to which deferred pay was made

available to the government of Mozambique in gold which could be resold at a higher price on international markets.

In this period, then, foreign exchange income compensated for falling export earnings. After 1977 production in some sectors began to recover, but by 1979 Mozambique was experiencing a foreign exchange crisis: South Africa ended the special arrangement for the remittance of Mozambican mine wages in gold sold at a price below international market levels. Economic recovery was getting under way, but it met a growing foreign exchange bottleneck. Exports were slowly climbing upwards, but the shortage of foreign exchange limited purchases of machinery and spares and thus expansion of both industry and agriculture.

It was clear that in the immediate and medium term, the industrial sector had an extremely limited capacity to absorb any additional workforce. This meant that for the most part the absorption of the unemployed, miners included, would have to take place in the agricultural sector.

But what kind of agricultural sector, and what kind of strategy for its transformation and development? In the first months of independence, emergency action was needed to counter the collapse in production and export earnings; o secure the supply of raw materials and food to the towns; to salvage the assets of the former settler agricultural sector; and to maintain rural wage employment. The government took over the management of most of the abandoned settler farms. In many instances individual farms were amalgamated into large production units under the direct control of the Ministry of Agriculture; in others land farmed by settlers was taken over by or handed over to local population groups to be used collectively as producer co-operatives. The creation of the state farm sector was an emergency response, but at its Third Congress in 1977 and at subsequent proceedings Frelimo adopted an explicit strategy for agriculture which called for the organisation of collective production on state farms, co-operatives, and communal villages. These production forms were to be part of what was envisaged for the socialisation of the countryside. There was to be planned integration of state sector and co-operatives; support for peasant agriculture to give a basis of stability to household production, and to encourage the production of marketed surplus and the renewal of basic agricultural services to prompt co-operativisation. The policy emphasised the transformation of peasant household production into co-operative forms aggregated in communal villages *(aldeias comunais)*.

The problems of transition are, of course, far from easy. The task, as Frelimo defines it, is not only to raise production but to construct different social relations of production. That involves the dismantling of colonial forms of management and labour use. Central to the latter, of course, was the migrant labour system. Colonial profitability depended on

cheap migrant labour – it was cheap because it was labour furnished by peasantry not definitely separated from the land and which did not therefore have to rely completely on migrant wages – and on colonial cropping patterns, chiefly monocropping of tea, sugar, rice and cotton, which used seasonal labour guaranteed by the labour-recruiting mechanisms of the state.

Displacing a settler agrarian class by turning a settler farm into a state farm is a major transformation, but it does not of itself alter the profitability structure o a farm organised for monocropping, and which depended on poorly paid seasonal labour. Mechanisation on the state farms may be said to replace and thus abolish colonial forms of labour exploitation; but mechanisation tends to be labour-saving rather than labour-absorbing, and between them mechanisation and monocropping do not adequately confront rural unemployment, especially in the southern provinces, caused by the phasing out of mine labour. The state agricultural sector has therefore not only to guarantee to raise production and productivity, but also to break with colonial production patterns of low permanent labour demand with seasonal harvest peaks which can absorb only occasional labour.

Correspondingly and coincidentally, a peasant sector for which seasonal wage work was indispensable to its very reproduction needs to break from its colonial past. Dispersed household plots with elementary technology face severe, probably insuperable, limits to higher production and productivity. The solution described as the socialisation of the countryside sees co-operatives as units of collective production, and *aldeias comunais* or communal villages as centres of social accumulation, social services and cultural and political mobilisation. But in their turn agricultural producer co-operatives must be able to assure at least subsistence and also a certain surplus; even in the initial formative stage, peasant families cannot risk the diversion of their labour from their own family production to the collective plot without guarantees of co-operative production results.

Ultimately in Mozambique, but also in all the labour supply states of Southern Africa, ending the migrant labour system, and above all the export of labour to South Africa, will depend on the transformation of the conditions of production in the rural areas from which the migrant labour has been drawn. The governments of most of the supplier states – Malawi is the exception – have declared themselves to be against their continued subordination to South Africa as suppliers of migrant labour. All, too, have in some way identified rural development as a way of breaking out of this role. However, the crtical issue is not one of rural development as such, but rather of the type of transformation which rural development policies tend to favour. There are perhaps only two possible paths of rural development. The first would be to encourage the emergence of cash crop production geared towards world market conditions. The production of cash crops for export would become the major focus of the development effort, and state

policies would favour those forms of production and those producers most capable of becoming successful cash-crop producers for the world market. Thus, a major proportion of state funds would be assigned to credits, agriculture extension services, marketing and the like for those capable of responding successfully to market demands. But an export-oriented cash crop economy in an impoverished labour reserve area would initiate or accelerate peasant differentiation. Resources reserved and channelled to the most successful market producers would invariably put even heavier pressure on the rest of rural producers to seek wage employment. Basically, the private appropriation of production resources by a minority of rural producers implies the separation from those productive resources of others who previously had access to them. Moreover, while agricultural production for export will provide some wage-labour employment, the evidence suggests that the restructuring of production in accordance with the norms determined by competition on world markets will be a process in which labour is shed.

The alternative to this strategy is a cooperative one, through which poor and middle peasants organise collective forms of production. This has been explicit policy in Mozambique since Frelimo's conquest of power. Experience elsewhere shows the difficulties facing such a strategy. Peasants must gain the confidence that cooperatives can provide for their material needs, and increase their production and improve their standards of living. In many countries cooperatives have become instruments of central state control over production and marketing without concomitant benefits to producers, or instruments for rich peasants to direct and control public resources for their own private ends. An appropriate strategy for cooperation must overcome these difficulties, in a situation where the reduction of employment in mining has cut the major flow of money into the rural areas of southern Mozambique. A successful cooperative strategy is the only alternative to a peasant economy which has to sell its male labour systematically over its southern frontiers. Mozambique's policies for the reconstruction of her rural economy will be critical for the future of that society. They could be as important for the future of all Southern Africa.

On the seventeenth day of August, 1982, Ruth First was killed in her office at the Centre of African Studies, Eduardo Mondlane University, by a South African assassin's bomb.

Ruth First came to join the Centre of African Studies in 1977. Among her other activities she organised the research on Mozambican miners in South Africa which is the basis of this book, *Black Gold*.

Ruth's arrival in Mozambique began a new phase in her political and intellectual work. As an investigative journalist she had already exposed the brutal exploitation of black labour

on the South African gold mines. As a politically engaged writer she had already started to analyse the problems of independent Africa. Now, as a co-director at the Centre of African Studies, she worked to form a collective which would train Mozambicans to investigate and analyse the concrete conditions on which the advance of the socialist revolution in this country must be based.

Ruth saw her work at the University as a culmination of her personal struggle to unite political militancy and intellectual work. Intellectual work became an instrument of the revolution. This was possible because FRELIMO established the conditions in which the analysis of the problems of socialist transition could occur and because FRELIMO encouraged an intellectual practice which links the consolidation of the Mozambican revolution to the liberation of Southern Africa.

A single bomb cannot destroy the basis of Ruth's work in Mozambique nor silence her ideas. The work she began as a young journalist in South Africa and which she pursued with the work on *Black Gold* will continue in Mozambique.

Aquino de Bragança
Director
Centre of African Studies

Some other books by Ruth First:

South West Africa, 1963
117 Days, 1965
The Barrel of a Gun: political power in Africa and the coup d'état, 1970
Portugal's wars in Africa, 1971
The South African Connection, 1972 (with Jonathan Steele and Christabel Gurney)
Libya, the Elusive Revolution, 1974
Olive Schreiner, 1980 (with Ann Scott)

Course: African Revolutionary Writing

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